The Traveler's Guide to Skyfall

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The City at a Glance

Skyfall has many different faces depending on how you approach it. If you are coming overland you will see a verdant plain stretching from the ocean to the far distant God's Peak Mountains… but avoid Velbore Pass at all costs, it has not been safe for ages. From the mountains flows the snowmelt-fed Plummet River, and if you follow this it will lead you to the fortress-like walls of Topside. These mammoth constructions run for several leagues along the coastal cliff, enclosing the farmland and paddocks which feed Skyfall. Despite the acreage, there are few buildings visible on Topside. Mainly one sees the crystal spire of the Lighthouse, a few mills and herd bunkers, and the Maw, a giant building shaped like a sea monster that serves as the gates to Belowdeck.

But if you come from the sea, you will be met with a far different sight. Night or day, long before you reach the coast you will see the gleam from the Lighthouse on Topside. This giant column of crystal gleams night and day to guide ships into the safe port below. Soon enough, the sheer cliffs will loom out of the horizon, separating the green pasture above from the white and blue ocean below, and before long you can make out the cave, nearly two leagues across and half a league high, that the city inhabits. Closer still you will make out buildings hanging from the ceiling, the most prominent of them all being the Senate Palisade directly under the Lighthouse. Airships and trade vessels sail in and out, deftly maneuvering around each other.

As you approach the mouth you will be boarded by a pilot from the Mariner's guild, borne to you by a small airskiff. These locals know all the passages through the breaker reefs which protect the harbor of Skyfall from the waves and the seasonal armada storms. Below you the water, though foam tossed, is clear enough to see all manner of life swimming around more than a few unlucky vessels. If you are fortunate, you may even glimpse a salvage golem at work recovering lost treasures from the newest wrecks, or harvesting bodies for the necromancers of the Lightless Depths.

All around the cave are building of every description and architecture. Catwalks, rope bridges, ladders and stairs abound. Maps of Skyfall are notoriously inaccurate, in part because of the difficulty in displaying a city that covers every surface above, below, and to the sides of this immense cavern, but also because buildings accrue with no perceivable plan, growing like fungus over older structures. The experienced visitor will learn to navigate by landmarks, like the aforementioned Palisade which glows with light filtered from above, the Plummet Falls with its many water traps near the back of the cave, and the ever visible mouth from which most traffic enters.

At the edges of the harbor inside the cave are many quays and piers where seagoing vessels are being unloaded, while above airships are tied to buildings that hang like stalactites from the ceiling. Some may become nervous when they see the likes of trolls, goblins, and other more nefarious races conducting business with elves, humans, and dwarves, but do not fret. Everyone here is ready to set aside old hatreds in the name of commerce, and if they cannot, the City Watch is always close at hand. The first casualty of war is profit, as the old Banking Guild proverb goes.

Next we will take a closer look at Topside, the lands above the city, and specifically the most unique Lighthouse one may ever encounter. Until then, rest well, traveler!

Topside, Breadbasket of a Trade Empire

If every ship that arrived in Skyfall were to carry only foodstuffs, it still would not be enough to keep the population from starving. The lands above, though lush and beautiful, are filled with so many dangers that a poor farmer could not hope to survive alone. Hives of mindfire wasps can spring up overnight, packs of wasters swarm through every few weeks, and this is to say nothing of the lumbering tetratauns, who could devour an entire herd without breaking stride. How then, could such a city hope to feed itself?

The answer, of course, is Topside.

On the plateau directly above the city, enclosed by gargantuan stone walls and watchtowers, are many thousands of acres of farm and pasture worked by nearly a quarter of Skyfall's population. Topside is a veritable symbol of fertility and prosperity, a patchwork of wheat, sorghum,

hemp, and countless other crops interspersed between open fields filled with livestock. These fields are monitored and regulated by the Minister of Agriculture, a local farmer elected solely by residents of Topside, but approved by both the Senate and the predominate Mage's Guild. Of all the people in Skyfall this Minister is among the most important; his ability to rotate crops, deal with weather related disasters, and generally keep the food flowing down the Gullet dictates whether the city as a whole prospers or withers.

The city walls are a wonder to behold. Outside the city they are nearly vertical, but inside they slope so gently up to their ultimate height that, standing inside them, one feels as though one is standing in the bottom of a great bowl. In some areas, industrious farmers have added layers of topsoil in order to plant even more crops, and in other slightly steeper rises locals have carved out seats to form large amphitheaters for performances, celebrations, and other civic functions.

The walls are built thusly, nearly ten times as thick as they are tall, in order to strengthen them against the power of armada storms as well as the larger forms of local fauna. Though they are not tall enough to keep even a youngling tetrataun from breaching them, they allow a heightened platform for a single legion of the city watch to mount enough of a defense to push back a herd of the five-legged monstrosities.

Topside is generally devoid of large structures. Certainly, one may observe farm houses and herd bunkers built low to the ground to survive the fierce winds of an approaching armada storm, but aside from these modest constructions there are but three buildings of note. The largest but least impressive of these is the communal mill, a large building set on the banks of the Plummet River shortly before it disappears into the Falls. This sprawling complex actually covers a length of the river, protecting an uncountable number of waterwheels that power many mills, grindstones, and other machines of a suspiciously arcane nature. While the wonders of this building are amazing to behold, it is a closely guarded area, requiring an act of Senate to even allow a tour. This humble author, after many years of service and more than a little expenditure of coin and influence, managed to obtain such a visit, and though he is forbidden to write of particulars, he is allowed to say that he has never beheld such a wonder of ingenuity, cooperation, and intelligence. This building truly gives him hope for our world.

Next in size is the Maw, the entrance to Belowdecks and Skyfall proper. Set at the end of the market strip just beyond the main gates, this is more sculpture than building. The Maw looks like a great seagoing behemoth set upon the plateau, its gaping mouth wide as if swallowing the main concourse to Belowdecks, reminding travelers from Topside that they now descend into the belly of the beast.

And finally, of course, is the great Lighthouse of Topside, of which there is simply too much to say in the little space left to us. Join us again next time, weary traveler, and be ready to climb with us to the top as we plumb its ancient mystery!

The Lighthouse, Beacon of Civilization

When one thinks of the city of Skyfall, the two buildings that instantly come to mind are the Topside Lighthouse and its counterpart belowdecks, the Palisade. Today we examine the former, how it is actually a part of the latter, and discuss the myth that ties the two together.

But first, a quick word on orientation. This humble author has spent so many years in this city that he often forgets what may appear strange to a neophyte. It should be said that Topside and Belowdecks are at once both locations and directions. A traveler walking through the fields of Topside will head belowdecks, and then find herself in Belowdecks. Likewise, another traipsing through the catwalks of Belowdecks will head topside, never to Topside. It is a linguistic technicality, to be sure, but one that will instantly mark you as target for any number of criminals and confidence men.

So, let us return topside to our exploration of Topside, and that most iconic and enigmatic of buildings, the Lighthouse. This unique construction stands at the center of the city (indeed, the city was built around it) less than half a league from the edge of the cliffs. It is most clearly described as a shaft of clear crystal nearly four hundred feet tall, though it has many structures built around its base and at its peak. At night, fires are lit around its base, setting the entire crystal to glow and calling both sea and air vessels home. During the daytime the sun glints off its many facets to offer the same beacon.

Seagoing vessels report spotting the Lighthouse more than two days out, and airship captains claim never to lose sight of it on the horizon, calling its glow the Trade Star.

The crystal itself is set in a shallow depression, and ringed around it are several semicircular buildings connected by bridges. These buildings house the light-keepers and the great stores of fuel for the fire, be they wood, peat, sulfur, or in some cases elemental mages, whatever happens to be trading cheapest at the moment. The sides facing the crystal are made of polished stone or glass to better reflect the beacon fires.

None of the surrounding buildings are taller than a few stories, after which the Lighthouse is pure crystal until its very tip. Here, a widow's walk and small landing platform have been erected, and are accessible only by airship. The City Watch maintains a constant vigil on all horizons, watching for threats to the city that can come in the form of foolish pirates, lumbering monstrosities, and devastating armada storms.

The Lighthouse serves another function for the city of Skyfall that is different from all other lighthouses, or at least of those that this author knows of. The shaft of crystal that towers so high above the plateau actually descends down through the ground to hang from the ceiling of the cavern belowdecks. Here it is partially enclosed by the Palisade, the largest building in all of Skyfall, home of the Senate itself. During the day, the same sunlight which glints off the crystal topside to act as a heliograph to ships filters down and shines out belowdecks as well, filling Skyfall with a cheery, if muted, glow.

The origins of this strange crystal have never been satisfactorily explained, but as one would expect, there are many myths and legends that tell of how it came to be. This author's favorite tells a tale of two warriors whose names have been lost to antiquity, one a crusader of order and rule, the other possessing a wild and untamed heart. Perhaps because their natures were so at odds with one another, they fought a fierce battle up and down the coast until the wild one, greatly wounded, ran and hid in a hole. The crusader was not fooled, however, and he thrust his crystalline spear into the earth, breaking it but slaying the wildling. In another version, the two warriors were brothers who fought side by side, and when the wild brother was slain in battle, the crusader marked the grave with his own broken spear. In either case, that broken spear remained and over the years it grew, or the world shrank, and it became the crystal shaft of the great Lighthouse you see to this very day.

So indeed, this mysterious structure is a vital piece of both the mystery and the day to day operation that is Skyfall. It is a lighthouse in two different senses of the word, serving to guide ships home night and day, and to provide sunlight to the cavern below. Next time, we walk through the Maw, down the Gullet and past the Exchange. Hide your valuables inside your boots, pack a dagger and make sure you have your citizen's coin or else we may run into some dire troubles as we set off to discover Belowdecks!

Belowdecks Part 1: A New Kind of Underworld

Oh, dear traveler, how excited I am! Though we have been spending quite a few days in Skyfall already, this is where the adventure truly begins! Topside is beautiful, to be sure, and holds some sites that may not be seen anywhere else, but in this humble author's opinion, everything happens belowdecks!

But first, we must prepare ourselves, for although Belowdecks is the safest environ for leagues in any direction, it has its own forms of danger that we must prepare for. And the first of those that we must consider is securing our Coin. We are not speaking of the money we will be spending down below, though safeguarding that is nearly tantamount; no, we are speaking of citizenship, identity, the legal right to traverse through Skyfall. Visitors in general are allowed into the open market sprawled in front of the Maw, but anyone who wishes to go belowdecks or travel into the more controlled parts of Topside (or at least do so legally) must be registered and coined with the City Watch.

The process is painless itself. Near the market and belowdecks on the docks where most vessels first birth one can find the Watch Registrar. You answer a few questions, mainly your name, city of origin, race and business, and are issued a temporary Trader's Coin, so named because most people come to Skyfall to engage in some form of trade. Your Trader's Coin now becomes your passport to the rest of the city, and you must keep it on you at all times or else face possible

incarceration. Those more magically inclined than yours truly have said that during this interview they feel some mild divination magic at work, but this author says if it means I am more safe in this city, than cast away!

One last note before we move on, Skyfall itself is ruled over by the Senate, but its interests are directed chiefly by the six Guilds left over after the recent trade wars. More to the point, citizenship in Skyfall is only granted to those who have been coined, more properly adopted or employed, by a Guild. To be clear, our Trader's coin stands apart, and does not make us citizens or members of any Guild. Everyone we meet shall either be visitors as we are, coined members of the Guilds, or uncoined illegals stooping in the city. There is more to say on coins, but we will cover them later when we take a closer look at the Guilds themselves.

So, coined as it were, we set off through the Maw and down the Gullet. Forty men can easily walk abreast in this wide walkway or they could if it weren't filled to capacity with all manner of people, livestock, and goods making their way to and from the Exchange. Despite the chaos, it slopes gently and turns on itself several times on its descent through the upper layers of rock that encase the city below. It is flanked by two deep ditches that funnel rainwater for city use, and the murmur of coursing water mixes with the echoes of footsteps, the mew of cattle and the throng of many voices. There's not much else to say about the Gullet; it is noisy, crowded, and smells chiefly of dung, and if you are not careful, you could easily get trampled by a steer going to the slaughterhouse.

It's a dangerous road, friend, especially for one not used to walking it. Let us stay the conversation while we traverse it. Stay with me, I'll keep an eye ahead for the clearest route, and you keep one on the ground to make sure we don't step in anything. We'll talk again once we come to the Exchange.

Belowdecks Part 2: Into a Warm Embrace

Well, that wasn't too bad, and here we are already. As you can see, after our brisk stroll the walkway opens up on a large cavern encased on the far side by a forty foot tall wooden wall. This is the Exchange, a type of market in and of itself but more for bulk purchases and industry applications. Here livestock are traded by the herd, caravans are bought and sold by the wagon, and goods are inspected, taxed and shuffled off through so many different doors and passages. The room is apparently well lit, but as to how, this humble author has never surmised.

We make our way past one set of doors in the far wall, our coin inspected by a member of the Watch, and walk out onto the Promenade beyond. This open deck is almost as large as the Exchange itself, and serves as most people's first (and if I may say, most scenic) view of Skyfall. Upon exiting, we see that we are at the back of a giant cave stretching more than a league to either side, and almost as far out in front of us. In the distance across we can see the mouth of the cave, itself a league across and nearly half as high. The sea rolls right in, bringing with it a salty breeze, and indeed some hundred feet below us we can see the waves lapping against the back of the cave. In the distance to our left (to port, as it were, for in Skyfall, the sea is forward, the cave is aft, and when one faces forward as we do port is to the left and starboard is to the right) the Plummet River bursts through the rock and showers down into so many water traps that its violent torrent becomes but a gentle fog near the ground. Its water sweetens the air and its roar, while not deafening, is loud enough to be heard throughout most of the city. However, not even it could silence the bustle of life, the sound of cord and canvas, the ringing of bells and the shouts of crews of countless ships, both on the water and in the air.

And of course, clinging to every side of the cave is the city itself. Buildings spring up at the water's edge, climb the cavern walls, and spread like swallows nests over the roof of the city. Majestic spires rise from the ground and dangle from the ceiling, and everywhere above and below us swing rope bridges, catwalks, climbing nets and ladders. And most prominent of all these buildings is the Palisade, the mirror of the Lighthouse topside, its shaft of pure crystal radiating a soft glow of sunlight through the tower built around it.

The continual buzz and bustle of this city is to this author as sweet and comforting as any melody sung by a favorite bard. Indeed, as I walk past the doors of the Exchange and onto the Promenade, I feel as though it is the voice of this fair city whispering to me, Welcome home, weary traveler!

It has been far too long!
But I am overcome now, tears well even as the heart soars. Come, friend, let us quit to the Crow's Nest and refresh ourselves with a local brew. After that, perhaps, I will take you by the docks and speak a bit of the recent Trade War, and the six Guilds who survived it. First round is on me, friend!

The Crow's Nest

This close to the cavern wall most structures stand atop stone rather than hang from it. As such, the path we take as we leave behind the Promenade may be aptly described as a wooden bridge, though in some places the shops and houses above and below it encroach so closely that it appears to be a boardwalk. But we soon leave that behind as we head out over the sea in the direction of the Crow's Nest, one of my favorite taverns. First we cross a rope bridge and actually find ourselves climbing a bit to reach a set of catwalks wrapping around a large cluster of hanging shops. Here, we take a spiral stairs up to the next level, another free-swinging bridge into a slightly more residential looking borough, and there ahead we can see the familiar shingle displaying a picture of the wooden lookout's platform that most sea ships put atop their tallest mast.

The catwalk here is also covered with buildings so that one only catches an occasional glimpse of cave wall far beyond or sea far below. We amble up to the door, which in all my years visiting this wondrous city has had the same bouncer sitting in front of it. Please to meet Zuth, a native born troll, and the reason things are so peaceful on this stretch of the walk.

And oh yes, I did say troll. Don't stare. I've mentioned it a few times, but in this fair city, all are equal if they have coin or skill and they manage to at least tolerate others. Believe when I say that Zuth the doorman has both plenty of skill and plenty of coin, and if you do manage to get in a row with him, no one will believe it was he who would not tolerate you.

For all his gruffness, he is actually quite a charming fellow. Ask him sometime about that anchor sitting next to him. I won't spoil the joke for you. He is only here to remind us that at the Crow's nest, unsheathed steel and spell of harm are strictly forbidden, and as long as you abide, he will be accommodating.

Inside on the first level it feels like almost any other drinking house you've ever been to, rows of tables and benches, small private booths on the edges, a long worn bar at the far end. Only two things mark it differently than a mainland tavern; there is no hearth, for the weather here rarely gets cold, and all the staircases lead down instead of up.

Saunter up to the bar and order an ale of the Lich. As I am buying the rounds today to celebrate this homecoming, I sign over a letter of debt. Purse thieves are so common and gold so rare in this city that most have given over to using letters of credit and debt, and allowing the Bankers Guild to sort it all out at the turn of tide. Because I am well known and I carry a Golden Shield of Trade (as opposed to your copper Penny of Trade), the Crow's Nest will take my letter of debt with no worry or markup. Were you to pay, unfortunately, we would require purchased letters of credit, and would be paying a premium.

Let us go to the Nest proper, down this spiral stair. We pass a half level of rooms both for business and long term habitation and find ourselves descending upon an open veranda beneath the tavern that commands an unblocked view of the cavern around us. A lithe elven lass glides between tables taking orders and disposing of empties before they get tossed overboard. To starboard there you may spy the platform rigged with pulleys that may be lowered to cargo ships below to procure refreshments both liquid and solid. To port you see a short pier with several air skiffs tied up to it, for if you look between the boards beneath your feet you will see we are even higher above the sea than when we started off from the promenade, and closer to the mouth of the cave as well.

Sit here, relax, and enjoy the view, traveler. Let the aromatic hoppiness of the ale revive you, and in a short while, we will travel to the docks!

The Docks and Vessels of Assorted Natures

Now that we are fortified and refreshed we should journey downwards to the water's edge and take a look at the lifeblood of this great city. Commerce powers civilization, and here trade powers commerce, which is fine and good since civilization protects us from the dangers of the Besieged Cliffs, so it is only by trade that we are able to survive those ridiculously gargantuan horrors that roam outside the walls of Topside…

Forgive me, traveler, the ale of the Lich is powerful stuff, and has gone straight to my head. In fact, I am having a bit of trouble walking. Perhaps a stroll through the catwalks would not be so advisable right now. I have promised to show you the docks, and indeed I will make good on the offer. Let us head to that pier and requisition an airskiff.

There are many air vessels here in Skyfall, powered in a number of different ways and operating in a variety of capacities. Small airskiffs like these can be hired to ferry you and a few friends about if you have the coin for it, and indeed I do. A word of warning, though, only pay after the trip is over or you may find yourself left behind by an unscrupulous sailor.

This particular model, do you notice the wings extending below the hull? Don't ask me how, but they thicken the air directly below them which allows the skiff to float as if on water. Were you to step off the pier here you would float next to the skiff yourself. However, if the pilot moved the vessel away from you the air would thin and you would plummet to a hard landing 200 feet below. From this height, even landing in water would surely break your bones so best watch your step as we climb aboard.

The ride is as smooth as can be, and swift as well if you head downwards. Heading upwards is a bit slower in this style of airship as you must tack against gravity. As I said, other ships employ different methods of locomotion and thus exhibit different characteristics in flight.

This may be our best view of the cavern fleet as we approach the docs. From here you can see quite a number of airships, most of them tied up to buildings above to unload cargo. Below you can see nearly ten times as many seagoing vessels as airships, themselves either at dock by pier or quay or else moored to buildings above. Skyfall is said to have so much line that were it all tied end to end you could lasso the moon itself, and though I doubt whether anyone has actually done the calculations I do love the poetry of it. Regardless, rope making is a major industry here, as the fields of hemp just outside the walls of Topside attest to.

You may ask why so many still choose to sail the sea when vehicles like these exist, and the truth is as always many-faceted. Foremost is the fantastic price of even a tiny skiff such as this, not just in purchase but in upkeep. You saw the small fortune I paid our pilot here, and you may notice the thinness of his shirt at the elbows? Most of what he has goes to this vessel, you can be sure. As they say, an airship is a hole in the sky that you pour money into.

There are also those with plenty of money who still sail the ocean because they do not trust the magics and machinations that keep these vessels afloat. If a ship sinks, you may at least attempt to swim to safety, but if the wings on our skiff were to fail, we would not be swimming anywhere so much as falling. Down.

Rapidly.

And then there are more practical reasons. While an airship may be faster on most voyages, it cannot carry nearly as much as a seagoing ship of the same size. Bulk cargos are almost exclusively shipped by sea, and traders reserve room on an airship for expensive items that warrant the extra cost or benefit from the added speed. Then again, pirates know this as well, and have almost exclusively moved to airships when they can afford it, as from a floating platform they may attack air and sea alike, and they can outrun most of those that sail on either.

So, though these machines can be amazing, they will not be completely replacing sea ships any time soon. Ever, if I am right. And if you need more proof of that, just look at the traffic here as we arrive at the commercial docks.

And my voice is sore from so much talking. Let me take a short rest, and we will continue discussing the stevedores and other guild men working here in a short while.

The Docks and Vessels of Assorted Natures, Part 2

Apologies, dear traveler, talking at such length really taxes me. I think perhaps soon we will call it a night and start fresh in the morning. But I've rested now; let us at least finish our look at the docks. The air skiff gives us an amazingly swift platform to view the chaos below, saving us considerable time and effort trying to wade through the throng of workers and sailors.

As I've said before, trade is the lifeblood of Skyfall, and nowhere is that more apparent than here at the heart of the city. Though many ships unload directly overhead into buildings throughout the cave, this is still the primary destination for most. The commercial docks encompass almost half the waterline around the cave, with the rest of the real estate dedicated to private residences or semi-private industry. We will speak more of that later.

The Docks proper, as you can see, is really just a locale. More than 60 piers and quays stretch out to feed hundreds of warehouses, all worked by thousands of every race imaginable. For a sailor visiting Skyfall his first time, the sight of orcs and trolls working with humans and dwarves may be shocking, but I find it a refreshing reminder of what makes society great, of how we may all learn to work together for profit.

There is no one owner or operator of the docks, though all who make their living by sea trade are members of the Maritime Guild. Sailors, pilots and shipwrights, stevedores and dock workers, salvers and fishermen, all fall under their sway, making them a particularly powerful force here in Skyfall. Before the Trade wars, there were several guilds for each of these industries, but they banded together to strengthen their position in the city, and are now a bit of a juggernaut.

Speaking generally, of course, a ship comes in and weighs anchor in the harbor beyond until it has space at the docks. It may spend several days waiting to port depending on the season, but once there is a slip, the crew hauls up and docks. Sailors disembark and avail themselves of the many taverns and… hostels in the area, while stevedores unload the goods and store them at whichever warehouse the quartermaster has procured space. This is also where goods are catalogued and taxed by an official of the banking guild working alongside a hand of the Senate and a royal of the Maritime Guilds. Such work may be overseen by other members of whichever guilds hold interest in the cargo, though there are at least always these three.

You will see also the heavily armed and armored figures walking around. These, as you may have guessed, are members of the Watch, the city guard. Almost half of their numbers are present here at the docks, which again speaks to the importance of fair and honest trade to this city. For comparison, only a quarter of the Watch guards Topside from attack by the gigantic Tetratauns, the swarms of mindfire wasps, and the tribal grothik that plague the walls daily, and less than a tenth are required to guard against and battle fires that would mean the instant and complete death of this fair city.

There is, of course, a large bastion for the Watch here at the waterline, and the Registrar for sailors may be found in the same place. Next to it, as if huddling against the legs of its bigger brother for protection, is the grand edifice of the combined Senate and Maritime Tax House. Here captains either pay the taxes on their goods or provide proof that remittance has already been made.

The Salvers have many stations set up throughout the cave and even a few temporary ports outside so as to reach a wreck first, but here you may also find their headquarters. This sprawling complex is part guild house, part warehouse, and part storage and reclamation yard for the goods plundered from the depths. There are strict laws about ownership, so for example if your shipment goes down in the harbor it is technically still yours, but the person who pulls it from the depths also claims a portion of its profit. A word of advice, stay out of the way of the salver golems; their lack of compassion for the living may be an unintended by-product of the orders they are given, but the danger is real nonetheless.

And finally here at the docks you may find a number of shipyards catering to the creation of new ships and the restoration of old, using building traditions of many different types, races and locales. Ships of both sea and air made here at the Besieged Cliffs must be tough and swift, and are widely regarded as some of the best made in the world. This is so much the case that many yards have their shipwrights under constant guard for fear of kidnapping, and they are all insured heavily if the guards themselves fail at their job.

Of the guilds, I should say more, now that we are here, but perhaps that will make for better chat tonight as we dine. It will give me a chance to explain the Trade Wars, only recently ended, and the political aftermath that has ensued.

THE TRADE WARS

Several times now I've mentioned the Trade Wars that recently plagued our city and obliquely referenced the six guilds that emerged in the aftermath. Though everything appears hale and healthy, if you look close enough at the buildings and people you can see recent scars still healing. In truth, we've had little less than a year of relative peace, and we have the six to thank for that. It's time I explain about the wars, but first, you need a little history lesson about our fair city.

When Skyfall was first founded, which was so long ago that I must admit right now we are speaking of things more akin to myth than fact, it was little more than a squalid place to hide from storm and creature. This was despite the cave originally being a breeding ground for leviathans below and tetratauns above. The first settlers were pirate bands seeking a safe port, for they were the only ones equipped to flush out such infestations. The usually independent bands found themselves in the precarious position of requiring each other's' help to battle so many dangerous creatures in such a space as the sea cave.

Thus the first brigand princes were chosen from among the hardiest of captains and sagest of leaders (I say princes, but there were a good many princesses among them as well). Some specialized in fighting the different creatures, others in training men and repairing ships, still more in coordinating raiding efforts to keep the princes in supply. Over the course of many years they finally rid the waters of all but the deepest leviathans and drove the tetratauns topside into the light.

And then, to the amazement of the brigand princes and princesses, once word got out that the great cave had been cleared, common folk who would normally flee from the sight of their sails started showing up on the pirates' doorstep offering services and trades in exchange for shelter. What's a brigand or two compared to the dangers of a flight of mindfires or the power of an armada storm?

At first, this suited the needs of the brigands. Suddenly, they had farmers and fishermen, capable shipwrights, merchants and tradesmen all begging to work for them. Because their resources were finite, only able refugees with skills or trades were allowed to stay, and at first they segregated themselves in little colonies all around the vast cave. Here a pocket of blacksmiths next to the coal dump, nearby an enclave of enchanters to imbue sword and shield with power, far away a clan of alchemists so that their black powder may not be set off by stray sparks from the forge. Settlers were given a coin denoting their trade, and if anyone were caught without a coin, or were proven to have a false coin, they were cast topside if they were very lucky. We shall not speak of the unlucky ones…

As the influx of settlers grew, so did the logistical needs of the city. Only a few years after establishing their safe port, the pirates found themselves severely outnumbered by common folk, and the citizenry (for they had begun to think of this cave as their city, their property) began to demand things that the brigand princes had no ability or even desire to offer. A fire brigade, a city guard, some means of settling disputes, dictates on the handling of sewage, all the mundane aspects of civilization that many of the princes had turned to piracy in the hopes of avoiding in the first place. The fledgling guilds began filling the vacuum of authority, and the leaders of each formed a masters' council which would eventually become our dear senate.

Slowly over many years, the council of brigand princes discovered that they had lost their safe port to a thriving city. Some exchanged their cutlasses for civilized attire or military office, others left to find their own private retreats and continued seeking fortune on the high seas. A few were hung, but that's another story. What replaced them were hundreds upon hundreds of guilds, all working for profit and vying for political capital and thus control over their own swath of the city, all in the name of profit.

The Trade Wars, continued

As I was saying, the political retreat of the pirate princes (and princesses, we must absolutely not forget them lest they decide to take our heads in offense) left the guilds uncontested for power in the city. Certainly there was the senate, but at the time it was little more than a common ground for those with power to safely argue with and insult each other. I assure you the Palisade Chambers are much changed nowadays. For one, they are considerably more dangerous.

In any case, this was the political climate for centuries. Hundreds upon hundreds of guilds, for everything from silk traders to street sweepers, shipwrights to shovelers of sh… well, you get the point. And worse yet, there were many guilds for each industry, some split by geographic location or political affiliation, others by equally inconsequential differences that could only be discerned by close and careful reading of the bylaws. For instance, there might be a discussion in a tailor's guild about the proper way to place the fasteners on a corset, and suddenly there is shouting of oaths and laying of blows, and then there would be two guilds, identical except in how the leadership thought best to secure bosom in linen.

Then, about two decades ago, things really got out of hand. It all started, as it often does, innocuously enough. A certain soap-maker's guild (not *the* soap-maker's guild, simply *a* soap-maker's guild) took issue with, of all things, the Necromancer's monopoly on the dead. Without delving too far into the insanity (though we really must talk about it at some time, because it is a ridiculous story in every sense) the Necromancer's guild has for nearly the entire life of the city been charged with the protection of Skyfall from the dangers of the Lightless Depths. In return, they are given the bodies of all dead Skyfallians, which of course they animate to man their undead army.

Certain soaps are made from lye and fat, and the soap-makers were tired of fighting with the butchers, leather workers, cooks and grease makers over a limited supply of animal corpses. They made the argument that they should be granted the rights to buy (I shudder at this) the less usable corpses of dead citizens to help alleviate their financial burden. Soon, they had a coalition behind them of other guilds who wanted to break other supposed supply and service monopolies in the city.

Suddenly the senate was inundated with requests to rule against different guilds. The senators, knowing an opportunity when they saw it, began passing laws, taking enormous bribes, and solidifying their power and positions. The more established guilds, uncomfortable with the senate's attempted power grab, began openly rebelling against their rulings, citing free trade and loss of profit.

Normal supply lines were thrown into disarray. Industries fearing shortages began to hoard goods whether they had the need for them or not. The rule of the day became "If you can buy it, you'd best buy it." Warehouses became overladen with goods that were not moving out the door, and began charging a premium for storage. Perishables began to perish in huge unused piles. The thieves' guilds suddenly found themselves in a position of great power and authority, or at the very least they grew rich off all the new jobs. All of these things caused prices to skyrocket to ridiculous new highs.

And here is where the ridiculous story ends, and the tragedy begins, but isn't that how history often goes? Men are comfortable, and so they become silly, greedy and stupid, and then they suffer for it. And suffer we did, on the Night of Fires.

The Trade Wars, Aftermath

The powder keg that was Skyfall continued to get worse. Guild affiliations changed from day to day, fights broke out in the streets over bags of coal, a couple of turnips, gold thread. Neighborhoods went on lock down, people were thrown out, beaten, or killed because they either did or did not join the right guild. For the first time in its long history, more people were leaving Skyfall to brave the dangers of the Besieged Cliffs than were moving into the city. Everything came to a head one cold autumn evening sixteen years ago, known now as the Night of Fires.

Some blame the Necromancers for intentionally leaving their posts, others claim that with more bodies being handed over to the soap-makers, rogue necromancers, and physician's schools, the undead army was not being resupplied as well as

it should have. Whatever the case, one night there was a breach, and a host of myconids, hideous aberrations, and other nameless horrors came swarming out through the tunnels and quickly spread through the lower parts of the city. Suddenly, guild affiliation mattered little, and many fought and died in the streets to protect their homes, their property, or their loved ones. Many more began looting everything that they could lay hands on.

Remember now that there was no single Watch, but a variety of brigades throughout the city beholden to their particular neighborhoods. Most of them, especially those serving the more affluent districts, were kept in reserve to guard their little fiefdoms instead of lending a hand to their fellows in need. In the chaos, a large number of fires were started and quickly spread, and likewise the fire brigades were overburdened and under-supported by their neighboring brethren.

When it looked as if the entire city were at an end, the unlikeliest of heroes emerged. Twelve of the most well established thieves guilds banded together to protect their fleecing grounds. Some defended the poorer sections of the city where monsters ran rampant. Others protected shops and warehouses in the safer districts from stealing their rightful bounty. A select few bribed, cajoled, or outright threatened neighborhood brigades into action, going so far as to hold family members hostage or murdering captains who refused to leave their districts.

Slowly, the tide turned. The brigades, backed by members of the Twelve, retook the ravaged districts and began fighting back the fires that threatened to consume the city. Word came that the Necromancers were holding out against what appeared to be several different armies on multiple fronts, and the collectors were sent for to gather the newly fallen and bolster their numbers.

By the time the crystal began to glow with the morning sun, most of the dying was done. It was time to rebuild both the city and the system. The Platinum Royals, the leaders of the largest guilds, assembled with the senate and convened the Autumn Council, endeavoring to fix what they could and to disband by winter. Until then, no member of the Council would be paid, and all the proceeds from their guilds would instead go to rebuilding the city. Not everything they did was so selfless, to be sure. In what could be seen as a very self-serving decision, they took advantage of the rebuild to incorporate all guilds into one of six, thereby solidifying their power come winter.

The original contract with the Necromancers was renewed. Once again they would deal solely with the dead of Skyfall, and use them to protect it from the dangers of the Lightless Depths.

The Council solidified all local militias into the Fire Watch in honor of the sacrifices made by the fire brigades on he Night of Fires, an entity unto themselves and responsible for protecting the whole of Skyfall from all other threats, be they monstrous or man-made.

The Banking Guild would control all aspects of money lending, and would also be responsible for traders, scribes, accountants, and merchants who did not produce their own goods.

The Crafters would be comprised of those who created goods or offered services, such as the carpenters, candle-makers, farmers and architects.

The Mariners' Guild would control the docks and along with it the shipwrights, salvers, pilots, warehouses and stevedores.

And finally, the Twelve, as reward for their efforts during the Night of Fire, were given any and all thieves guilds, assassin's dens, or local gangs to control… though they would still be hunted by the Fire Watch if things got out of hand.

And thus, by the winter solstice and with the city at least on the road to renewal, the Autumn Council disbanded, the senate reconvened, and the six remaining guilds vowed to keep the peace.

The Dregs

I apologize, dear traveler, for the heaviness of our tale. History is rarely a happy story, or more correctly when history is happy, no one tends to talk about it. However, we are almost finished with our tour of this fair city; only three distinct locales remain, and the next one is a natural segue from the Night of Fires. The districts behind the docks, and yet low enough to be built upon rock instead of hanging from it, lie before us. Feast your eyes on the Dregs, and pray you never end up here.

Belowdecks is comprised truly of two cities, one that hangs from above and another that reaches from below. At the waterline we have already seen the Docks, which comprise any place near the shore of this sea cave that may safely harbor and serve ships. Behind that, and in the places unsafe to land, honeycombing its way into the rock, and near the Plummet Falls where the moss and mold eat away at any exposed timber lies the slums of Skyfall, collectively called the Dregs. If you remember our tale of the Night of Fire, this is where the creatures of the lightless depths first exploded forth, and upon looking closely at the back of the cave you may notice some of the wider tunnels and thoroughfares that will take you to Fenrot and the Depths beyond. Here and there you may still spy a burnt out hull of a building, though it is truly difficult to distinguish between them and the otherwise ubiquitous squalor.

Here is mostly residences, and the few businesses that do exist are primarily local in nature... market stalls, general goods, bars, or fronts for things more nefarious. As we approach the back walls of the cave, you can see how the Dregs seem to climb up as if scrabbling to pull themselves out of the mire below. There at the midpoint, what we would call the turn of the bilge in a ship, lower city and upper city entwine in a series of platforms, stairs and catwalks. The Open Market in Topside is where you go to buy foodstuffs, the Exchange is for bulk goods, and the shopping districts that run throughout the upper city sell almost everything else, but there at the Turn, that's where you go for goods and services of a more nefarious nature.

It is said that somewhere there at the Turn, the Twelve hold their court.

But below, though it may seem depraved and wicked, in truth the Dregs is simply a home to many of the less fortunate in this city. Rents, if they are even collected, are cheap. Communities tend to look out for one another with a fierceness usually reserved for the wilds of a frontier. Those born and raised here, indeed, those that survived the Night of Fire, are as tough as they come and not a bit shy about it.

And that, my friend, was why I told you of the Trade Wars before we arrived here. To understand the people that still call this place home, with its dark and all too recent history, are very much still defined by that war and the night it ended sixteen years ago. This is the dark side of Skyfall. This is what happens when a city defines its values on profit and loss. This is where the lost end up.

But they are not evil, or even threatening for the most part. These that live in the Dregs are simply unfortunate. Or else, they prey on the unfortunate, and that's where the danger lies. I say this as a warning, for as you can see our little airskiff is coming in to land. No need to be scared, only cautious. And in the name of cautiousness, we will hire a few local toughs to escort us to our next location. I intend to show you at least the tiniest bit of Fenrot.

There, you should be cautious and scared. Indeed I would be worried if you were not.

Fenrot and the Lightless Depths

As you may know, the cave system that spreads out from our own megalith eventually connects to the denizens of the Drow and the Duergar, races not known for their love of... anything, really. In fact, we are less than a few days travel from several large habitations of both races, and in the old days confrontation with them was plentiful. Please do remember that if you spot a drow or duergar, or indeed something even more nasty walking the catwalks, common courtesy is to allow them the benefit of the doubt. Even those of dubious parentage are welcome in Skyfall, so long as they turn a profit.

Nowadays, we are protected from the more bloody minded members of these races, and from other less-minded and more monstrous creatures, by the Necromancers known as the Wardens of Life. Centuries ago a deal was struck (that some find distasteful) between the Brigand Princes and the Wardens of Life; all the dead of Skyfall would belong to the mages, and in exchange they would use their hordes to protect the citizens of Skyfall from the dangers of the Lightless Depths. In essence, every citizen of Skyfall is duty bound to fight for the city in both life and in death.

Now, there are many entrances into the cave system behind the cavern of Skyfall, but for the most part they are covered by buildings, or at least blocked by massive fortified gates. Only a few open roads exit into the lightless depths, and

this is what we travel today, flanked on either side by a large troll-blooded reaver and a cheery but assuredly quite deadly grothik assassin.

We have spoken of the Necromancers, their pledge, their duties, and a little of the danger they stave off, but I felt that you should for at least a moment witness the world these few mages inhabit. And I should give fair warning, we are about to see a lot of undead. Many of them. Also, we shall (which I consider to be imminently more offensive, smell quite a lot of them. The stench shall get so thick that it will begin to feel as though we are also tasting a number of them as well.

Here, I suggest you tie this sprig of mint just below your nose, and perhaps chew on some of it as well.

It is important to note that at no time will we be in danger from any of these disturbing creatures. The dangers will come from other things. Centipedes that could devour cows, aboleths, lurkers, anglers that lure unsuspecting humanoids into their open jaws... these are what the troll and rat-kin are here for. And, to be clear, should we spot any of those creatures, their duty is to fight, and our duty is to run.

Fenrot is not a true district, it refers to the catacombs inhabited and patrolled by the necromancers and their brood. There are more than a few settlements, some near Skyfall like the Raising Grounds we are heading to now, some far into the caverns, like Firsthold, the deepest fortification manned by the Wardens. Each has a distinct function, though all serve as forts to repel invaders from the depths.

As we come to the Raising Grounds, you will first notice that stench. Bodies are brought here (and to several other locations) and are sorted and assigned before they are raised. Chiefly the Wardens prefer a zombie for defense, but the size and condition of each body helps determine its role in the defense of the city. Those with severe tissue loss are flensed and raised as skeleton shock troops. Some with more extensive damage are brought back as shadows or specters and used as ephemeral scouts. Some are mummified or turned to ghasts and sent on deep reconnaissance into the lightless depths. And then there are those who are missing portions of their bodies who are sent to the Wall...

But first, notice the near-banality of the Raising Grounds. Were it not for the piles of corpses, the undead servants shambling past performing menial tasks, you might mistake this for any other forward outpost of an empire. The humanoids here are pleasant enough. Certainly in the bases near the city there are families, children, homes and shops. It feels both familiar and yet so very alien. And now that we have seen the similarities, I will show you one last treat before we leave.

As I said, corpses lacking legs, arms or substantial bits of torso are added to the outer wall of every Warden Hold. From the inside, this wall appears nothing more than a fortification, but the outer edge, the one facing the danger, is covered in the remnants of undead who are no longer able bodied, but are far from finished. The whole wall is a mass of limbs and heads that protects the Hold from invaders. Acting as both guard and guard post, wall and watcher, the undead that cover the wall will spot approaching enemies, alerting their Wardens, and will hold them back if they attempt to scale or cross the fort boundaries.

That is perhaps all I can stomach of these grounds today. Though they play an important part in this city's defense, I fear I have little love for the Holds of Fenrot. We shall return to the city, where I will show you the last district on our tour, the Palisade.

The Palisade District

We come out from the tunnels and board another skiff, this time heading back for the upper city. But we do not aim for the periphery; our destination is no crafting district or mere market or neighborhood. We make for the jewel of Belowdecks, the Palisade District.

I mentioned the crystal that forms the Great Lighthouse topside, and extends down belowdecks. That there in front of us, the tallest building to hang from the cavern ceiling, the one that chines with a warm glow, that is the Palisade, the home of the senate. It surrounds the crystal, hangs from it even, and though it looks to be quite a large building, the crystal itself takes up much of the interior space. Above, near the ceiling, the Palisade is wider; there you can find the chambers where the senate meets and debates endlessly about important things. Extending down the shaft of crystal, the Palisade grows smaller, and

these are the private chambers of the individual senators, where the real deals are made. To stand in the building during the daytime is like standing above in Topside. The crystal is said to give off not just the light but also the warmth of the sun.

Around the Palisade is the wealthiest district in Skyfall, where in fact I have my apartments. The district itself is home to some of the most lavish and exquisite manors, some of the most exclusive restaurants and the most prestigious shops. As well you can find here the city's largest and most lush hanging gardens, most prestigious schools and campuses, and even an aquarium housing many of the creatures from the waters below, all hanging hundreds of feet above the ocean and yet still underground.

My apartments are there, just forward and to port of the Palisade. They are simple for the district, but their favorite feature of mine is the hanging balcony below the main rooms. It is a small circular affair with a stair that takes you above, and from there I can spy every last bit of my beloved home.

Though some look at all the Palisade District and see nothing but opulence, I myself see the soul of a great city, a great enterprise. This is the dream, a place of beauty, knowledge, prosperity and perspicacity, all dangling precariously and serenely from the ceiling of this cavern. It is sunny and warm during the day, it glows softly of firelight in the night. From my balcony I can look in any direction and am in awe of what I see. Aft of me is the beauty of the city sprawl crawling across the cavern, a bit hazy from the mist of the Plummet Falls. Forward is the wide mouth of the cave where I often view the sun setting golden orange in the evening. Below both to port and starboard I can spy the docks welcoming in trade vessels of all sizes, the heart that pumps the very life blood of our city. And all about me I can hear my brothers and sisters, each of them yearning for their piece of the dream.

It may not be perfect and it is so rarely fair, but in this city, my city, truly anyone may rise to greatness.

Thank you traveler. Welcome to Skyfall.

Veldure of Oxna-on-the-Flats